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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that public school choice programs, which affect a much larger number of U.S. students than do educational vouchers, offer the chance to promote achievement on a grand scale. It begins by examining previous research that found that only urban African American students in voucher programs showed significant academic improvement. It concludes that if the voucher programs were expanded to include large numbers of low income students, the academic benefits found in the research would likely be lost, because once voucher schools accept large numbers of low income students, they are likely to face all the difficulties of high poverty schools (negative peer influences, low parental involvement, and less ability to attract qualified teachers). It also notes that after creaming off the most motivated students and parents to the voucher schools, the students left behind in public schools may be marginally worse off. The paper recommends developing a widespread public school choice program that is likely to succeed. It suggests that instead of trying to pack low income students into a tiny number of private voucher schools, carefully structured public school choice programs could build on the success of thousands of middle class public schools. (SM)

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THE CENTURY FOUNDATION
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# The Problem of Taking Private School Voucher Programs to Scale:
## The Next Issue in the Voucher Wars

ED 467 363

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The U.S. Supreme Court's decision to permit public funding of vouchers to private religious schools is likely to energize proponents to vastly increase both the number and size of voucher programs. But, ironically, expansion may finally bring to light a central flaw of voucher programs: their ostensible pilot-level successes cannot be replicated when taken to scale. Even if it is true, as voucher proponents claim, that small voucher programs for low-income children increase the achievement of African American students, the best evidence suggests that if those programs were expanded to include much larger numbers of low-income students, the benefits would quickly fade away.

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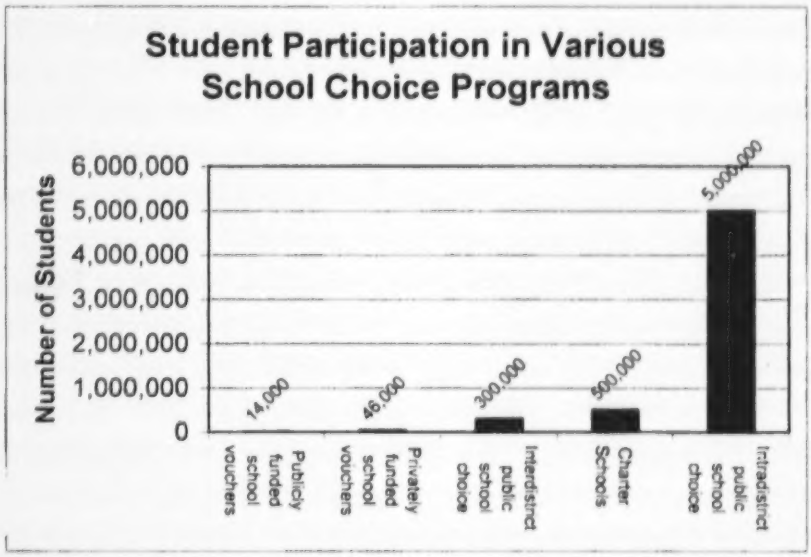


*Sources:* Jeffrey Henig and Stephen Sugarman, "The Nature and Extent of School Choice," in Stephen Sugarman and Frank Kemerer (Eds), *School Choice and Social Controversy* (Brookings Institution Press, 1999), Table 1-1; William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Brookings Institution Press, 2002), Table 2-1; Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer, *Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools* (Rand, 2001), p. 8.

Traditionally, the voucher argument has been fought out on familiar lines. Advocates say it is unfair to trap kids in bad schools; that it is educationally sound to provide more options to children because one size of schooling doesn't fit all students; and that the pressure of competition will improve all schools. Opponents

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note that under voucher programs, the final "choice" is often given to schools, not to parents; that private schools, accustomed to being independent, are unlikely to comply with public regulation; and that private schools that segment the market on lines of race, religion and ethnic differences will undermine the important role of public schools in promoting democracy, social cohesion, and American citizenship.

But the new court decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* is likely to raise a fresh set of difficulties for private school voucher advocates: the problem of taking small successes to scale. Some studies have found that private school voucher programs can cut the achievement gap between African American children and whites by nearly one-half after three years, leading proponents like Harvard's Paul Peterson to ask, "Can nine more years or private school education eliminate that test score gap?"[1] But as with many programs that appear to have success on a small-scale level, the evidence suggests that voucher gains are very unlikely to be replicated once programs are expanded to reach large numbers of students. By contrast, this issue brief will argue, public school choice programs, which affect a much larger number of students in the United States than do vouchers (5.8 million vs. 60,000 - see figure), offer the chance to promote achievement on a grand scale.

## Recent Voucher Research

The research on vouchers is summarized in two new books, *Rhetoric Versus Reality*, compiled by four Rand researchers, and *The Education Gap*, by the University of Wisconsin's William G. Howell and Paul Peterson.[2] The best studies, both sets of authors agree, involve "randomized field trials." In cities where philanthropists have established privately funded school voucher programs for low income students – including New York, Washington, and Dayton – many more applications were received than could be accommodated, so lotteries were held to determine which students would receive vouchers. The "treatment group" (those receiving vouchers) is thought to be comparable to the "control group" (those who applied for vouchers but were turned down and remained in public school) because the winners and losers in the lottery are believed to be equally motivated.[3]

Howell and Peterson found that the cumulative average test score change after three years in New York, Washington and Dayton was a modest 0.7 national percentile point gain for voucher students. For African Americans, however, the three city average gain was 6.6 percentile points, and in New York City, the black gain was 9.2 percentile points. Nonblacks saw a three city average drop of 3.5 percentile points.[4] The authors note their results are consistent with other research finding that urban minority students do disproportionately better in Catholic schools than others.[5] Howell and Peterson say the voucher test score gain for blacks is comparable to gains from reduced class size in Tennessee and larger than gains from accountability programs adopted in Texas and North Carolina.[6] Howell and Peterson argue that the results suggest programs should be expanded to include much larger numbers of students in central city urban areas.[7]

## Why Do Achievement Gains Appear - and Why Only for African Americans?

The Howell and Peterson studies have been criticized on methodological grounds: critics note that a substantial number of lottery winners did not use the vouchers because they could not afford the required co-payment; the voucher programs have fairly high attrition rates; and the authors' decision to aggregate data from various grades may provide a misleading indication of the program's effects.[8] But even assuming that the findings are completely valid, is the major policy implication they derive – expanding vouchers to more urban students – wise? To help answer that question, it is first important to know *why* vouchers produced achievement gains and why *only African Americans benefited.*

For many years there has been a running argument as to why comparable students sometimes do better in private schools than in public schools. Voucher advocates tend to believe there is something inherent in private and religious schools that offers an advantage over public schools – for example, less bureaucracy and politics or the educational benefits of a cohesive religious community.[9] Voucher opponents, by contrast, tend to believe that any observed student gains may largely be attributable to the fact that private schools provide an environment where peers and parents in the school community are self-selected and particularly motivated.[10] Classmates in private schools (or in affluent public schools) are more likely to be high achieving and academically engaged, and less likely to cause disruption; parents are more likely to be active in the school

and to volunteer in class and make donations; and good teachers, all other things being equal, are more likely to be attracted to schools with highly motivated students and active parents.[11] This argument over why gains occur has crucial policy implications because if it's the demographic input (peers and parents) not the inherent structure of private schools that explains the private school advantage, voucher programs may not be successful on a broader scale. As the Rand researchers noted, if "voucher students benefited only because the program put them in classrooms with high-achieving peers, then the effect might disappear in a larger-scale program that puts large numbers of low-achieving students in voucher classrooms together."[12]

Which factor provides the more important explanation: private school policy or peers and parents? Rand's review of studies says we don't fully know the answer to this question.[13] Howell and Peterson's study is also tentative in its explanations, but it clearly doesn't rule out the peers and parents hypothesis. The authors did try to control for self-selection of *individual* students, by comparing among the winners and losers who applied for the voucher lottery, but they didn't control for the *school-level* motivation - the fact that motivated students who won the lottery were surrounded by peers and parents who are also motivated, while motivated students who lost the lottery were surrounded by the least motivated peers and parents.

Moreover, Howell and Peterson central finding – voucher schools benefit black students, but not others – provides important new evidence that it's peers and parents, not something distinctive about private schools *per se*, that are driving achievement gains. If it were reduced bureaucracy and the distinct religious environment found in most voucher schools that makes a big difference for students, then presumably attending a voucher school would help students of *all* races. But if school quality is driven largely by peers and parents, then it's likely to particularly help those who are switching out of public schools that have less active parents and negative peer influences – specifically, high poverty public schools.[14] Who attends such schools? The research is very clear that in the United States, low income African Americans are much more likely to attend high poverty schools than are low income whites. While one in twenty poor whites live in a high poverty neighborhood (more than 40% poor), one in three poor blacks do.[15]

Howell and Peterson don't connect the dots directly in this way themselves, but their new book is full of support for the hypothesis that voucher gains for African Americans are driven by the people who make up voucher school communities more than anything in particular about the distinctive nature of private schools *per se*.

- Economic Segregation by Race. Howell and Peterson emphasize that African Americans attend schools that are highly segregated by race and class, and therefore have more to gain from moving to voucher schools than do other poor Americans.[16] They note further that in the national privately funded voucher program they study, African Americans in segregated schools are much more likely to apply than those in less segregated schools.[17] And the authors also note that other researchers have found that the gains among blacks attending Catholic school are more than twice as large for blacks living in big cities, where poverty is most concentrated, than for other blacks.[18]
- Peers. Howell and Peterson acknowledge that leaving poverty concentrated public schools to attend private schools with more affluent classmates surely provides students with a more motivated and high achieving peer group. This is true in part because nonvoucher students attending private school and paying full tuition are more advantaged than the typical public school student in a low income school; and because low income classmates who are self-selected voucher students provide a comparatively positive peer group.[19] While Howell and Peterson don't provide a detailed breakdown of the differences between students who applied for vouchers and those who didn't in the three cities they studied, they do outline data on those who apply to the national Child Scholarship Fund, which provides 40,000 privately funded school vouchers annually. All families need to be low income to qualify, but choosers differ in important respects from nonchoosers: they are more likely to be stable (children stayed in the same school) than those who didn't apply; and they are far more religious, with 66% attending church once a week, compared with 38% in the eligible public school pool.[20] Likewise, in San Antonio, Texas, the authors find, the baseline test scores of choosers was higher in math and considerably higher in reading than among nonchoosers.[21] The authors acknowledge that these differences can have an effect and cite a study by Caroline Hoxby finding that a one percentage point

increase in classmates test scores translates into a rise in a student's own scores of between 0.15 and 0.4 points.[22] The motivation of classmates also may have a lot to do with Howell and Peterson's finding that voucher parents report only half as often as their public school counterparts that fighting is a serious problem in the school their child attends.[23]

- Parents. Parental involvement has long been associated with school quality and there is strong evidence that voucher schools benefit from parental "creaming." Howell and Peterson note that families in all three cities had to provide some of their own money to participate in the voucher program, and the parents in each of these cities were much more active in the school than the parents of nonchoosers.[24]
- Teachers. Howell and Peterson acknowledge the possibility that teachers might have been more highly qualified in the voucher schools than in the urban public schools that students were leaving.[25] In theory, teacher quality should benefit students of all racial groups equally, but it makes sense that having adequate teachers would benefit black students in particular because strong evidence suggests that students attending economically and racially segregated public schools have far weaker teachers than students attending more affluent schools.[26]

## Policy Implications

If the analysis of the data above is correct, then three policy implications seem logical.

### 1. Can't Take Vouchers to Scale.

If we expanded the programs, as Howell and Peterson urge, to include large numbers of low income kids, throwing the programs wide open so that private schools essentially take in the population now served by high poverty public schools, then the academic benefits the authors found are likely to be lost.[27] Once voucher schools take in large numbers of low income students, rather than a self-selected group of students whose parents cared enough to put money down, the schools are likely to face all the difficulties of high poverty public schools – negative peer influences, low parental involvement, and less ability to attract qualified teaching staffs.

### 2. Existing Small-Scale Programs Benefit Some but Hurt Others.

On the surface, it might appear that if it is unwise to expand voucher programs in size, small-scale programs should be implemented in additional cities so at least small numbers of African American students could benefit as they did in New York, Dayton and Washington. But this analysis ignores the impact of vouchers on the much larger number of students who remain in public schools. Howell and Peterson's research suggest students stuck in public schools (including the control group) do not perform very well. Moreover, if the reason self-selected African American students do better in voucher schools is that they are leaving negative school environments associated with concentrated poverty, the huge numbers of children left behind may be marginally *worse off*, because some of the most motivated low income peers and parents have left.[28]

Howell and Peterson try to address this concern by arguing that even though the public school students left behind enjoy a less favorable peer and parent school community, they may benefit because voucher programs place competitive pressures on public schools to improve. But the authors concede that this research is disputed and themselves provide no new data on this crucial question.[29] In any event, if the creaming issue is a powerful negative force on students left behind in public schools, wouldn't it make more sense to find ways to garner the competitive benefits of choice, without incurring the strong inequities associated with peer stratification?

### 3. Another Alternative: Widespread Public School Choice.

Is there a way to avoid the Catch 22 of voucher programs – that if they stay small, they leave most students behind and worse off, but if they are expanded, they lose their effectiveness? Is there a way to respond to the compelling argument of choice supporters – that the current system unfairly rations educational opportunity through the housing market – in a manner that helps *all* low income students,

not just a few? A way to provide a diversity of school offerings and the potential competitive pressures provided by choice without further stratifying students?

If the limited size of voucher programs mean they can't be taken to scale, there is another alternative that can be: widespread public school choice. Instead of trying a large-scale voucher experiment that is destined to fail, we should encourage a large-scale public school choice program that is likely to succeed.

Middle class public schools, like private schools, have relatively good teachers, manageable discipline problems, motivated peers, active parents and high expectations that can benefit all children who attend such schools, middle class and low income. As Howell and Peterson themselves note, significant achievement gains were found among low income students who attended middle class public schools using a housing voucher under the federal Moving to Opportunities program (compared with equally motivated low income students who lost the lottery and remained in high poverty public schools.)[30]

Instead of trying to pack low income kids into a tiny number of private voucher schools, public school choice programs can build on the success of thousands of middle class public schools. Nationally, about two-thirds of public school students are middle class (not eligible for free and reduced price lunch). Bringing all public schools into a system of choice would potentially allow every child to attend a solidly middle class public school. Studies suggest that low-income achievement will rise, and middle class achievement will not suffer so long as schools are more than 50% middle class.[31]

Public school choice systems, like vouchers, can be subject to "creaming," so it is important that programs be structured carefully. The trick is to make choice work to promote, rather than undercut, equality of opportunity, educational achievement, and social cohesion. Successful public school choice systems have three ingredients.

- First, choice is mandatory. Cambridge, Massachusetts and a number of other jurisdictions have eliminated the old system which assigns students based on where their parents can afford to live and instead requires every parent to choose from a variety of options. Self-selection is avoided, the Rand study notes, because where all students are required to choose, "the problem of nonchoosers disappear."[32] Every school is magnetized based on community sentiment about the types of pedagogical and thematic offerings that are desired. Public schools compete for parents. Under-chosen schools can be closed down or redesigned; and over-chosen schools can be franchised.
- Second, choice plans should be subject to fairness guidelines. While Americans are strongly opposed to busing, they are supportive of fairness guidelines to help ensure that public school choice promotes integration.[33] In a number of communities, from Cambridge to Raleigh, North Carolina, from San Francisco to La Crosse Wisconsin, communities have adopted guidelines to ensure that all schools have a strong core of middle class families.[34]
- Third, to be successful, public school choice should be allowed across school district lines, following successful models in St. Louis, Hartford, and Boston. While some might think the prospect of inter-district choice is politically unfeasible, polls find 75% of Americans support such inter-district public school choice.[35] Today, 300,000 students attend public schools of choice across district lines – twenty times the number that participate in publicly funded private school vouchers programs (see figure).

The new federal education legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act, moves us in the direction of public school choice for economic and academic integration. The Act requires all districts to provide public school choice for children trapped in failing schools to attend better performing public schools. This legislation, which requires a form of desegregation by student achievement, also requires that low-income students be given priority when space is limited, a tacit endorsement of the importance of economic integration.

The idea behind public school choice is to combine the best elements of vouchers while avoiding their downside. By moving beyond a system of assignment that ties school quality to the value of housing, public school choice can make the important strides toward equity that choice advocates say they want. Public school choice also allows students to better fit their learning needs by offering a Montessori program at one school, or a concentration on computers at another. Howell and Peterson acknowledge that such public school choice mechanisms, like magnet schools, have been associated with test score gains, even after addressing self-selection issues.[36] Whatever benefits stem from competition between schools are also likely to be had with public school choice. But at the same time, the various difficulties and dangers associated with vouchers – issues of creaming, and Balkanization – can be avoided by folding choice into the existing system of public schooling that has served our democracy so well for so many years.

## More Information


The Century Foundation Task Force on the Common School (chaired by Lowell P. Weicker, Jr.) http://www.equaleducation.org(www.equaleducation.org/Task_Force/index.asp)

Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer, Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools (Rand, 2001). (www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1188)

William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools (Brookings Institution Press, 2002) (www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/press/books/education_gap.htm)

Richard D. Kahlenberg, All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice (Brookings Institution Press, 2001). (www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/press/books/all_together_now.htm)

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Gordon MacInnes, "Kids Who Pick the Wrong Parents and Other Victims of Voucher Schemes," A Century Foundation White Paper (1999) (www.tcf.org/white_papers/voucher_schemes.pdf)


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June 27, 2002


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**ENDNOTES:**

1. Paul Peterson, Address to the Heritage Foundation, May 23, 2002. (www.townhall.com/audio/content/lecture020323b.ram)
2. Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer, *Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools* (Santa Monica, California: Rand, 2001); William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002)
3. Gill et al, p. 74.
4. Howell and Peterson, p. 146, Table 6-1.
5. Howell and Peterson, p. 143.
6. Howell and Peterson, pp. 151-152.
7. Howell and Peterson, p. 208.
8. See Gill et al, pp. 86, 81, and 78, respectively.
9. See John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets and American Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1990) (nonpolitical); James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) (religion).
10. See e.g. Patrick J. McEwan, *Comparing the Effectiveness of Public and Private Schools* (New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization of Education, Teachers College, Columbia, 2000); Henry M. Levin, "Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice, and Costs," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 17:373-392 (1998).
11. Richard D. Kahlenberg, *All Together Now: Creating Middle Class Schools through Public School Choice* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), pp. 47-76.
12. Gill et al., p. xix. See also Id., p. 89.
13. Gill et al, p. xviii.
14. For a summary, see Kahlenberg, pp. 47-76.
15. David Rusk, *Inside Game Outside Game* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), p. 72.
16. Howell and Peterson, pp. 23-26.
17. Howell and Peterson, pp. 64 and 88.
18. Howell and Peterson, p. 143.
19. Gill et al, p. 165. See also Kahlenberg, pp. 98-99.
20. Howell and Peterson, pp. 62-64.
21. Howell and Peterson, p. 78, Table 3-10.
22. Howell and Peterson, p. 165, citing Caroline Hoxby, "Peer Effects in the Classroom: Learning from Gender and Race Variation," Working Paper 7867 (Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research, August 2000). Howell and Peterson try to downplay the issue, noting that their polls of students found "little change in student friendship patterns." Howell and Peterson, p. 165. But this response ignores the findings of many researchers that peer effects go far beyond close friends to include all sorts of classmates. See studies cited in Kahlenberg, p. 143-144.

23. Howell and Peterson, p. 110. Howell and Peterson found that school disruption did explain student performance but not why African Americans did particularly well. Id, p. 160. However, they acknowledge this could stem from inaccurate measurements. Id, p. 164.

24. Howell and Peterson, p. 84 (money down) Howell and Peterson, p. 116 (parents active).

25. Howell and Peterson, p. 165.

26. Kahlenberg, pp.67-72.

27. There are other problems associated with taking voucher programs to scale. To accommodate increased demand, new voucher schools that pop up in response may very well be of lower quality than existing private schools. See Gordon MacInness, "Kids Who Pick the Wrong Parents and Other Victims of Voucher Schemes," (New York: Century Foundation White Paper 1999), pp. 29-32.

28. This is analogous to what happened in universal voucher programs where the most motivated and wealthy families left and those remaining in public school were worse off. See discussion of studies in Chile and New Zealand in Kahlenberg, p. 97.

29. Howell and Peterson, p. 205 (citing research by Jay Greene in Florida indicating improvement in public schools from the threat of vouchers, but noting also that the results are disputed because it may have been other accountability provisions that resulted in improved performance.)

30. Howell and Peterson, p. 41 (citing research by Jens Ludwig, Helen Ladd and Gregory Duncan).

31. For a discussion of these studies, see Kahlenberg, pp. 39-40.

32. Gill et al, p. 223.

33. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, *Time to Move On: African-American and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 1998), p. 41.

34. Kahlenberg, pp 104, 228-257. See also Report of The Century Foundation Task Force on the Common School (chaired by Lowell Weicker) (forthcoming, September 2002).

35. Terry Moe, *Schools, Vouchers and the American Public* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), p. 333.

36. Howell and Peterson, pp. 11-12.

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